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Not everyone wants more people along canal

Increasing visitors to recreation area could damage wildlife, opponents say

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DELAWARE CITY -- Charles Taylor doesn't mind getting his boots muddy when he walks the trails along the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal.

A little mud means he's getting away from the daily grind. It means he might spot a beaver or a raccoon scuttling off into the brush.

Plans to widen and pave trails along the canal could change that, Taylor fears.



Rep. Mike Castle said the project is designed to accommodate multiple uses.

"It sounds nice," said Taylor, who lives about 2 miles from the canal and enjoys solitary walks along the dirt trails. "But you're going to have such an influx of people, the wildlife is going to suffer. We don't have much wildlife in this part of Delaware. Why do we have to destroy what little we have?"

U.S. Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., hosted workshops last week in Delaware City and Chesapeake City, Md., to unveil preliminary designs for a new-and-improved Chesapeake & Delaware Canal recreation area. Castle, who helped secure \$150,000 in federal funds for a \$300,000 study, began pushing for the project last spring, saying he believes the 9,000 acres of land surrounding the canal should be more accessible to the public.

"It's really a beautiful natural spot," Castle said Tuesday at the Delaware City workshop. About 75 people attended, despite a steady snow. "Most people have never even seen it."

Castle listened as a number of area residents expressed concerns about how increased vehicle and pedestrian traffic might affect hunters and dog trainers who already use land around the canal designated for those purposes.

One angry resident stormed out of the workshop, saying: "In the 44 years I've been alive, you have paved my state of Delaware. Now you're trying to get your fingers in the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal."

"We're trying to accommodate all the uses," Castle said after the workshop. "Yes, we're going to bring in more people. But it's not going to be an overcrowding situation. ... We're not exactly paving everything."

Plans unveiled last week call for improving trails that span the 14-mile length of the canal on both its north and south sides. The new trails would be 15 feet wide and paved, suitable for multiple uses, such as biking, hiking or skating. Designs show the creation of a number of additional entry points and "comfort stations" to make the area more accessible for recreational uses.

Hunting, fishing and dog training areas would be left alone, designers said.

"We're pretty confident we're not going to do any harm," said Mark Eberle, the Army Corps of Engineers' project manager for the recreation study,

The corps owns the canal and its banks, from the Delaware River to the Chesapeake Bay.

'Extremely inexpensive'

The estimated cost of the improvement project is \$23 million to \$25 million. Castle said he plans to begin seeking money this spring.

"This is an extremely inexpensive project because we don't have to worry about things like right of way," Castle said, adding that he expects to get funding in small chunks in the years ahead.

Work on a multiuse trail likely will unfold in three phases, said Teresa Durkin, a spokeswoman for Andropogon & Associates, the landscape architecture firm that drew conceptual designs for the project.

- Phase I: Improve 10 miles of the trail closest to the water on the north side of the canal from Delaware City to Chesapeake City, with six proposed entry points and comfort stations, including information kiosks.

- Phase II: Improve 10 miles of the trail closest to the water on the south side of the canal from Chesapeake City to Scott Run, with five proposed entry points and comfort stations

- Phase III: Improve 2.1 miles of trail on the north side of the canal near Reedy Point Bridge, with two proposed entry points and comfort stations.

Planners considered the input from 474 citizens who completed surveys last spring about how they already use the area, Durkin said.

"We're not talking about a radical plan," she said. "We're talking about taking what you already have and making it more accessible."

St. Georges residents Joe and Margi Michini are looking forward to improvements along the canal. Their business, St. Georges Country Store, is located just a couple of dozen footsteps from the north trail.

Margi likes to walk to the water's edge to watch ships sail past.

"I think it would be a positive change," she said. "More people will be able to enjoy it because you won't have to go through the whole 4-wheel nonsense to use it."

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